

Four Symbols

The **Four Symbols** (Chinese: 四象; pinyin: *Sì Xiàng*, literally meaning "four images"), are four mythological creatures appearing among the Chinese constellations along the ecliptic, and viewed as the guardians of the four cardinal directions. These four creatures are also referred to by a variety of other names, including "**Four Guardians**", "**Four Gods**", and "**Four Auspicious Beasts**". They are the Azure Dragon of the East, the Vermilion Bird of the South, the White Tiger of the West, and the Black Tortoise (also called "Black Warrior") of the North. Each of the creatures is most closely associated with a cardinal direction and a color, but also additionally represents other aspects, including a season of the year, an emotion, virtue, and one of the Chinese "five elements" (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water). Each has been given its own individual traits, origin story and a reason for being. Symbolically, and as part of spiritual and religious belief and meaning, these creatures have been culturally important across countries in the East Asian cultural sphere.

Contents
History
In I Ching
Correspondence with the Five Phases
See also
References
External links

History

Depictions of mythological creatures clearly ancestral to the modern set of four creatures have been found throughout China. Currently, the oldest known depiction was found in 1987 in a tomb in Xishuipo (西水坡) in Puyang, Henan, which has been dated to approximately 5300 BC. In the tomb, labeled M45, immediately adjacent to the remains of the main occupant to the east and west were found mosaics made of clam shells and bones forming images closely resembling the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, respectively.^[1]

The modern standard configuration was settled much later, with variations appearing throughout Chinese history. For example, the Rongcheng Shi manuscript recovered in 1994, which dates to the

Four Symbols	
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Clockwise from top left: Black Tortoise of the North, Azure Dragon of the East, Vermilion Bird of the South and White Tiger of the West.	
Chinese name	
Chinese	四象
Literal meaning	Four Images
Transcriptions	
Standard Mandarin	
Hanyu Pinyin	Sì Xiàng
Vietnamese name	
Vietnamese alphabet	Tứ tượng
Chữ Hán	四象
Korean name	
Hangul	사상
Hanja	四象
Japanese name	
Kanji	四象
Hiragana	ししょう
Transcriptions	
Revised Hepburn	Shishō
Kunrei-shiki	Shishō

Four Gods	
Chinese name	
Chinese	四神
Transcriptions	

Warring States Period (ca. 453–221 BCE), gives five directions rather than four and places the animals differently. According to that document, Yu the Great gave directional banners to his people, marked with the following insignia: the north with a bird, the south with a snake, the east with the sun, the west with the moon, and the center with a bear.^[2]

In Taoism, the Four Symbols have been assigned human identities and names. The Azure Dragon is named Meng Zhang (孟章), the Vermilion Bird is called Ling Guang (陵光), the White Tiger Jian Bing (監兵), and the Black Tortoise Zhi Ming (執明).

The colours associated with the four creatures can be said to match the colours of soil in the corresponding areas of China: the bluish-grey water-logged soils of the east, the reddish iron-rich soils of the south, the whitish saline soils of the western deserts, the black organic-rich soils of the north, and the yellow soils from the central loess plateau.^[3]

In I Ching

The Four Symbols are closely connected with the yin-yang philosophy. Fuxi explained the Four Symbols as one of the stages of the creation of the world, in the following way:

Vietnamese name	
<u>Vietnamese</u>	<i>Tứ Thánh</i>
<u>alphabet</u>	<i>Thú</i>
<u>Chữ Hán</u>	四聖獸
Korean name	
<u>Hangul</u>	사신
<u>Hanja</u>	四神
Transcriptions	
<u>Revised Romanization</u>	Sashin
Japanese name	
<u>Kanji</u>	四神
<u>Hiragana</u>	しじん
Transcriptions	
<u>Revised Hepburn</u>	Shijin
<u>Kunrei-shiki</u>	Shijin



Four images as Taijitu and digrams-yao

<p>無極生有極、 有極是太極、 太極生兩儀、 即陰陽； 兩儀生四象： 即少陰、太陰、 少陽、太陽； 四象演八卦， 八八六十四卦。</p>	<p><i>Wújí shēng yǒu jí, yǒu jí shì tàijí, Tàijí shēng liǎngyí, jí yīnyáng; Liǎngyí shēng sìxiàng: jí shǎo yīn, tàiyīn, shǎo yáng, tàiyáng; Sìxiàng yǎn bāguà, bābāliù shísì guà.</i></p>	<p>The Limitless (無極; <i>wuji</i>) produces the delimited (有極; <i>youji</i>), and this <i>demarcation</i> is equivalent to the Absolute (太極; <i>taiji</i>).</p> <p>The <i>Taiji</i> (the two opposing forces in embryonic form) produces two forms, named <i>yin-yang</i> (陰陽) (which are called <i>Liangyi</i> (the manifested opposing forces)). These two forms produce four formative <u>phenomena</u>: named lesser yin (少陰, <i>shaoyin</i>), greater yin (太陰; <i>taiyin</i>, which also refers to the <u>Moon</u>), lesser yang (少陽, <i>shaoyang</i>), and greater yang (太陽; <i>taiyang</i>, which also refers to the <u>Sun</u>).</p> <p>The <i>four phenomena</i> (四象; <i>Sìxiàng</i>) act on the eight trigrams (八卦; <i>Bagua</i>), eight 'eights' results in sixty-four <u>hexagrams</u>.</p>
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Correspondence with the Five Phases

These mythological creatures have also been syncretized into the Five Phases system (*Wuxing*). The Azure Dragon of the East represents Wood, the Vermilion Bird of the South represents Fire, the White Tiger of the West represents Metal, and the Black Tortoise (or Black Warrior) of the North represents Water. In this system, the fifth principle Earth is represented by the Yellow Dragon of the Center.^[4]



A Han-dynasty pottery tile emblematically representing the five cardinal directions



Bronze mirror with cosmological decoration from the [Belitung shipwreck](#), including [Bagua](#) and the Four Auspicious Beasts

Four Auspicious Beasts	Five directions	Five seasons	Times of day ^[5]	Five colors	Wuxing	Four Symbols	Yao	Five Gods
Azure Dragon	East	Spring	Dawn	Green	Wood	Young yang	=	Goumang
Vermilion Bird	South	Summer	Midday	Red	Fire	Old yang	=	Zhurong
White Tiger	West	Autumn	Dusk	White	Metal	Young yin	=	Rushou
Black Tortoise	North	Winter	Midnight	Black	Water	Old yin	=	Xuanming
Yellow Dragon or Qilin	Central	Midsummer		Yellow	Earth			Houtu

See also

- [Chinese astrology](#)
- [Wufang Shangdi](#)
 - [Color in Chinese culture](#)
- [Four Dwarves \(Norse mythology\)](#)
- [Four Heavenly Kings](#)
- [Four Holy Beasts](#), the Vietnamese version
- [Four kingdoms of Daniel](#)
- [Four Living Creatures](#)
- [Four Mountains](#)
- [Four Seas](#)
- [Four sons of Horus](#)
- [Four Stags \(Norse mythology\)](#)
- [Four temperaments](#)
- [Hindu astrology](#)
- [Lokapala](#)
- [Purple Forbidden enclosure](#)
- [Royal stars](#)
- [Tetramorph](#)

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External links

- [28 Chinese Asterisms](https://web.archive.org/web/20060316014110/http://www.chinapage.com/astronomy/constellation28.html) (<https://web.archive.org/web/20060316014110/http://www.chinapage.com/astronomy/constellation28.html>)
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